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Will Gorbachev Free the Jews?

Avital Shcharansky, the wife of jailed Soviet dissident Anatoli Shcharansky, told HUMAN EVENTS last week that Soviet dictator Mikhail Gorbachev wants a "good image" in the West and may now be tempted to release her husband and other Jewish political prisoners. She emphasized, however, that more pressure is needed on the Soviet regime.

She held out the hope that Gorbachev would not only release the 40,000 refuseniks, people denied visas to leave the Soviet Union, but would also "open the door" for other Jews to leave. She said that 400,000 Jews would leave the Soviet Union and go to Israel if they could.

Her comments came on the eve of the anniversary of the signing of the Helsinki Accord, which was supposed to guarantee human rights in 35 countries, including the Soviet Union. Officials of these nations will meet in Helsinki this week to "celebrate" the agreement.

Referring to the plight of her husband and thousands of others jailed or harassed in the Soviet Union, she said, "It's a little absurd to celebrate a human rights accord when we have such a situation."

Last week, after testifying before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Mrs. Shcharansky briefly met with Secretary of State George Shultz, who was arriving to testify on other matters. The committee had just passed a resolution appealing for the release of Soviet Jewry and Shcharansky hopes that Shultz will raise the issue of the Soviet human rights record when he's in Helsinki for the ceremonies. Shultz is scheduled to meet with the new Soviet foreign minister, Edvard Shevardnadze.

Mrs. Shcharansky points out that whenever there is a meeting of Shultz and his Soviet counterpart, a "gesture" is made by the Soviets in an effort to mollify critics of their human rights record.

Last January, for example, just prior to a meeting between Shultz and then-Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, the Soviets announced that Shcharansky would be allowed a visit by his mother. In April, prior to another meeting between Shultz and Gromyko, it was announced that his

mother had received a letter from him. No communication has been received since.

The case of Shcharansky has been a major point of irritation in U.S.-Soviet relations since 1978, when he was "convicted" by the Soviets in a kangaroo court of working for the CIA and sentenced to prison. His real "crime" was demanding basic human rights and wanting to emigrate to Israel.

President Jimmy Carter publicly denounced his persecution by the Soviets, while President Reagan has met with Avital Shcharansky on several occasions to express deep concern about the fate of her husband.

Mrs. Shcharansky is hopeful that in connection with the U.S.-Soviet meeting at Helsinki, the Soviets may go beyond the making of a mere "gesture" in the case of her husband. She said recent reports of diplomatic contacts between the Soviet Union and Israel suggest something much greater may be in the works. She said one Soviet diplomat has been quoted as saying that the regime would allow the repatriation of the Jews to Israel if the anti-Soviet "propaganda" on human rights would stop.

"I think," she told HUMAN EVENTS, "that soon they will open the door for the Jews to leave."

Over the past four years, the door has been closing on Jewish emigration. In 1979 the figure was 51,320. It fell to 21,471 in 1980 and continued falling to just 896 in 1984.

The Soviets are clearly sensitive on the issue. Pressed on the matter at a recent Moscow news conference devoted to the Helsinki Accord, Vladimir B. Lomeiko of the Soviet Foreign Ministry's press department, suddenly became "emotional," according to the New York Times, and then accused human rights advocates in the West of being "modern slave traders" who run "houses of prostitution" and "debauch young girls."

Mrs. Shcharansky is convinced that Gorbachev, who seems more attuned to style and image than previous Soviet dictators, will respond to the human rights criticism with a dramatic gesture. But only if the West keeps up the pressure.